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C O N F I D E N T I A L KUWAIT 000416

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARPI

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SUBJECT: KUWAITIS NEAR UNANIMOUS IN PRAISE OF IRAQI ELECTIONS

REF: KUWAIT 00404

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reason 1.4 (d)

1. (C) Summary and Comment: All Kuwaiti dailies hailed the January 30 elections in Iraq as a success. Several rank-and-file Kuwaitis unanimously characterized the elections to PolOff as legitimate and historic, and in separate discussions, Kuwaiti banking executives told the Ambassador that the elections represented a positive development for Iraq. Although there are likely to be some Islamists who feel the Iraqi Sunnis were marginalized during the electoral process, most saw the election as an unquestionable success. Some conservative Sunnis, still wary of a Shi'a controlled Iraq however, will continue to closely watch the constitutional process unfold to see that an Iraqi constitution protects the rights of Sunnis. End Summary and Comment.

2. (SBU) During January 31 conversations with PolOff, several rank-and-file Kuwaitis at the National Assembly all independently agreed that the elections in Iraq were a success and signaled the start of a new era in Iraq. The Kuwaitis with whom PolOff spoke ranged from liberals to Muslim Brotherhood Islamists. All agreed that the elections were legitimate and marked a great success for the Iraqis. One Sunni Muslim Brotherhood office director, who was sympathetic to Iraqi Sunnis who opposed it, did agree that the election was legitimate and hoped the new Iraqi National Assembly would draft a fair constitution that protected the basic rights of all Iraqis. Many other Kuwaitis, mostly liberal, publicly announced their praise and support for the elections:

- Liberal Shia Al-Watan columnist Khalil Haider called the elections a turning point in the history of Arab democracy.

- Newspaper editor-in-chief of English-language Arab Times and Arabic-language Al-Seyassah Ahmed Al-Jarallah described the election success saying the courage of the Iraqis led to the defeat of terrorism.

- Dr. Moudi Al-Amoud, President of Arab Open University and a prominent Kuwaiti academic/activist, congratulated the U.S. on the success of the elections during a meeting with the Ambassador. She said the pictures of Iraqis voting after so many years of repression were moving. She said she monitored the reaction of several Arab satellite stations the night before the election and then the night of the vote. The stories on the eve of the election were very negative, while many of the channels clearly didn't know what to say in the face of the obvious success of the vote the next day.

3. (C) During separate January 31 meetings with the Ambassador, Chairman of the Bank of Kuwait and the Middle East Hamad Al-Marzouq and Chairman of the Commercial Bank of Kuwait Abdulmajeed Al-Shatti said they saw the Iraqi elections as a positive development and one which they hoped would lead to an improved security situation in Iraq. (Note: Both banks are exploring business opportunities in Iraq and are hoping to open branches or initiate joint ventures. End Note.) Al-Marzouq expressed concern over possible Shi'a political domination, adding that a continued U.S. presence in Iraq would provide a check on Shi'a power and possible Iranian influence. Al-Shatti described the Iraqi elections as a "good thing" which "brought tears to (his) eyes."

5. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

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